

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT: ITS ARISTOTELIAN *ESSENCE*¹

W. James Popham
University of California, Los Angeles

Formative assessment works. An ever-growing gob of empirical evidence attests to the truth of this pithy proclamation. But *why* does the formative-assessment process work? That is, *why* does formative assessment seem able to bring about giant jumps in students' learning?

I sometimes hear colleagues urging teachers to adopt formative-assessment practices in their classrooms because “research evidence supports the effectiveness of formative assessment.” Yet, while I applaud anyone who tries to get teachers to give formative assessment a try, I think those who employ a “research-ratification” rationale to promote formative assessment are making a mistake. They’ve got it backwards. Formative assessment works *not* because there is research evidence to support it. Instead, there is research evidence to support formative assessment because formative assessment works!

To get a proper handle on the why-it-works issue, we really must understand *the essence of formative assessment*. But to do this, we first need to comprehend what something’s “essence” actually is.

Let me rewind the calendar for many decades to the days when I was an undergraduate philosophy major in a small liberal arts college. Although the orientation of my professors’ approach to philosophy was definitely Aristotelian, because it was a Catholic college, there were also frequent dollops of St. Thomas Aquinas tossed into our studies. If I recall, St. Thomas came into play occasionally just to “tighten up” Aristotle. Anyway, I really can remember—even to the exact words employed to define it—one of the most important concepts in Aristotelian philosophy, that is, the nature of something’s *essence*.

¹ This is an abridged version of a foreword written for a yet-untitled, soon to be published, Corwin Press book about formative assessment authored by A. Gullickson, et al.

My professors pointed out that, according to Aristotle, an essence was “that which made a thing to be what it is.” Something’s essence, therefore, could be contrasted with its “accidents.” Accidents, in Aristotle’s view, were the properties of something unrelated to its essence. So, if the essence of human beings were that we are “rational animals,” the accidents associated with a particular human being might be the person’s height, skin color, or sense of humor. What, then, is the essence of formative assessment? What is it that truly makes formative assessment to be what it is?

In my view, the essence of formative assessment is its **relentless reliance on assessment-elicited evidence of students’ learning-status—for teachers to make decisions about adjusting their instruction** or for students to decide about adjusting their learning-tactics. Whether made by teachers or by students, those adjustment decisions won’t always be correct. After all, human beings make mistakes, sometimes almost hourly. But adjustment decisions predicated on assessment *evidence* regarding students’ current achievement levels will almost always be better than will adjustment decisions made by teachers or students who are proceeding without assessment evidence.

Put simply, **formative assessment looks at *ends* (or outcomes) as a way of deciding whether *means* (or inputs) need to be changed**. This basic ends-means model is so beguilingly simple that it may, to some, seem unworthy of much attention. Yet, the use of an ends-mean model underlies much of humankind’s progress over the years. Unarguably, an ends-means paradigm will make teachers’ instruction better. People who guide their future actions by evaluating the outcomes of their past actions will surely be more successful than will people who don’t. And this certainly applies to teachers as they make their instructional decisions.

I worry these days when I encounter proponents of formative assessment who seem to be more preoccupied with the trappings of formative assessment (that is, with its “accidents”) than with its essence. We want formative assessment to work as well as it can work because, then, students will learn as well as they can learn. But I’ve recently attended several conferences in which ardent advocates of formative assessment have described what goes on in “real-world” formatively oriented classrooms. More often than

not, those descriptions have arrived in the form of video-recorded classroom scenes or, perhaps, video discussions among teachers as part of a formative-assessment learning community. What I've been stunned by, however, is the absence of any attention to what I regard as formative assessment's essence. What's missing is the use of students' assessment results to make adjustment decisions about what's to be done next. What we were presented with in those videos was good stuff, the sort of stuff I'd like to see in all classrooms. But there was never an illustration—*not even one*—of formative-assessment's essence.

Let me underscore my concern about this absence with a few examples from recently attended conferences. Either on video, or sometimes during teachers' oral reports, we heard about the importance in formatively oriented classrooms of teachers' communicating learning targets to students. Beyond that, we were also told how to clarify the success criteria by which students could then judge how well they were doing in reaching their learning targets. Well, explicating learning targets, along with their accompanying success criteria, are definitely good things for teachers to do. Accurately described instructional intentions will typically have a positive impact on kids' learning. But these positive payoffs can transpire in classrooms where the teachers have never even heard of formative assessment. Clarified instructional intentions, when ladled out in student-friendly lingo, will almost always help make instruction more effective. And it will help make the formative-assessment process more effective too. But it's not what formative assessment's essence is.

Then there's the dividend that properly framed feedback can provide for students. Numerous videos of "formative assessment in action" highlighted teachers' skillful use of descriptive feedback. When feedback is not student-comparative but, instead, helps students gauge where they are and what they should do to get where they want to be, it works wonderfully. Descriptive feedback is a hands-down winner. But descriptive feedback can be advantageously used by teachers who know naught about formative assessment. Carefully crafted descriptive feedback will improve what goes on in almost any classroom. Use of descriptive feedback can also make formative assessment more effective. But descriptive feedback is not what makes formative assessment truly tick.

Besides what seems to be a preoccupation with the trappings, not the heart, of the formative-assessment process, I also see different writers trying to subdivide formative assessment into more palatable chunks. Almost every author who spins out a book about formative assessment, understandably, presents a different way of cutting up the formative-assessment cake. I've done so, as have other writers. Happily, research evidence suggests that the formative-assessment process is sufficiently robust so that, even if used in substantially different ways, it still works. It works, that is, as long as its essence undergirds whatever subdivision scheme is being recommended. **The essence of formative assessment—its preoccupation with assessment-yielded evidence regarding students' status as the stimulus for adjustment decisions—needs to be central in *any sensible* conceptualization of the formative-assessment process.**

When you hear someone telling teachers how to make formative assessment fly, regard that advice through the prism of what makes formative assessment really work. At bottom, **formative assessment succeeds because it makes us attentive to assessment evidence about what's happening to kids, and then decide what to do next based on this evidence.** That's the essence of formative assessment. Everything else, you see, is just an accident.

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